

MELANIE EMMEN: My name is Melanie Emmen and I nominated Unity Dow, a Motswana lawyer and former judge to be a part of this exhibit.

I nominated her because for years she's served as an inspiration to me. She's a model of how to be a Motswana woman in today's world, how to respect our traditions but also advocate for the changes that are necessary. Dow has had a remarkable legal career.

In '96 she sued the government in order to extend citizenship rights to children of matrilineal descent. Traditionally in Botswana, only fathers could pass on nationality. So if a Motswana woman married and had children with a foreigner, as Unity Dow did and as my mother did, their children were not considered Botswana.

Dow successfully argued that these rules were unconstitutional. So her children and my brother and I and everyone else like us now enjoy the full benefits of citizenship. But the case was about more than just a passport.

It was about having a seat at the table, it was asking if Botswana women have an inherent value equal to that of Botswana men, if we by our very nature, have something that should be protected and could be passed on. And Unity Dow made the government change its answer to that question. She made them say yes.

She was also the first female judge on Botswana's high court, where she presided over the landmark San case, the biggest and probably most controversial case in Botswana jurisprudence. Through all of the smoke and conflicting interests, through the allegations of Western interference and abuses of power, Dow and her colleagues were able to get to the very heart of it, to see the people in this case, and the laws that protected them.

In discussing the case later, which the court found in favor of the San, she said it was ultimately about a people demanding dignity and respect. It was a people saying, in essence, our way of life may be different, but it's worthy of respect. We

may be changing and we may be getting closer to your way of life, but give us a chance to decide what we want to carry with us into the future.

Dow approaches the law with a broader outlook. She sees it as a tool-- one of many-- to serve Botswana. We can see this best, I think, in her books and the novels she's written that deal with some of the very uncomfortable realities of Botswana today, with tradition and globalization, gender roles and social customs, and particularly with HIV and AIDS.

Far and Beyond, her first novel, gave me a framework of how to think about HIV and how to think about how it was affecting my family and what I could do about it. She's a big reason I came to law school and a bigger reason that I believe in the law. And I'm proud to be able to follow in her footsteps.